

Ida, or We'll all go to Heaven

Ida, ou nous irons tous au paradis

Ida, of we gaan allemaal naar de hemel

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IDA, OR WE'LL ALL GO TO HEAVEN

STILL FRAME *Ida* is an initiation story.

The main heroine leaves the convent where she grew up in search of her identity, through a memorial search she goes on with her aunt, her only living relative. Indeed, *Ida* (who had thought up until then that her name was Anna) learns from her aunt of her Jewish origins and the circumstances of her parents' disappearance, whose bodies she will seek to locate.

If the question of the relationship between Jews and Poles during the Second World War has been the object of numerous publications in Poland over the last few years, films have, however, only recently taken an interest in this theme. Through the films *Pokłosie* (*Aftermath*) by Władysław Pasikowski in 2012, and *Ida* by Paweł Pawlikowski in 2013, the painful history of Poland's participation in the extermination is adapted for the screen. Whereas the mud, the fire and the blood shown by Paweł Edelman's camera work triggered a polemic that made *Pokłosie*, according to *The Economist*, "the most controversial Polish film ever made",¹ the nostalgic dreamlike quality of *Ida* received an undisputed welcome not only in Poland, but also from around Europe.

Both films unfold upon a landscape of forgetting, fields and forests sealed in their silence, which is echoed in the silence of the inhabitants. The sound of shovelling and the image of heaps of dirt flying under the shovel, prelude of the discovery of human remains in both films, is necessary for the truth to come forth. And then, in *Pokłosie*, the abyss of violence opens up. A violence inherited by the descendants of those who did the pogroms, a violence that is ready to resurface in the present day as the "aftermath" against those

(1) www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2013/01/polands-past

who seek to make the truth known and recognized, themselves descendants of murderers and full of history's nightmare. In *Ida*, however, insurmountable violence no longer presents a threat. It is redistributed "fairly" (and "providentially") so to speak between the assassins and the survivors. Wanda, *Ida*'s aunt, in turn became a murderer herself in the cogs of Stalinist terror. Such interpretation is all the more comfortable as yesterday's victims (the Jews) have seemingly transformed themselves into prosecutors today. Moreover, even if the surviving heroines wished to cry out their pain loudly and clearly, it would be impossible, as their mouths often aren't shown on the screen, relegated to the bottom of the image. This luckily allows the entire story to be redeemed by an incommensurate sky unfurled above our sinful earth.

In the chorus of praises that followed the release of *Ida* on screen, one of the rare harsh voices came from Héléne Datner of the Jewish Historical Institute in Krakow who noted that Poles are not ready to receive the direct and overly painful message of *Pokłosie*, whereas they easily accept the dreamlike tale of a converted Jew. Datner draws attention to the anti-Semite common places that surround Wanda, a debauched and alcoholic Jew and also a fearsome communist judge, hence explaining her nickname: the bloody Wanda (modestly translated by "Red Wanda" in

English subtitles). The Polish farmer's use of the myth of the ritual crime is a way to reduce the ambiguity of the murderous act that struck her family members (including her child whom she barely even knew: an unworthy mother, as it is thus implied). Did the Polish farmer not slaughter the Jewish family in order to save *Ida* (the only one who wasn't dark-skinned, mistakenly resembling the "Girl with a Pearl Earring")? Did he not, also, by killing them, spare his victims an even greater suffering which the Nazis would have inflicted onto them?

With Wanda's suicide, three quarters into the film, with the return of her young niece, the novice, to the convent and with the exhumation and then the burial of the victim's remains (whereas in *Pokłosie* the victims are only given a grave after one of the brothers who initiated the memorial search is assassinated), the landscape of the destruction is definitively laid out.

However, the forgetting and the indifference that mark the Polish landscape described by Paweł Pawlikowski seem to have filtered into the cinema as well. Indeed, amnesia has taken hold of its language and yet ensures his capacity to narrate. Without this language, we would return to a demonstrative logic, for example to what is termed "primitive" cinema, in which the concept of space and time is reduced to its simplest expression: everything happens here and now.

This is the exact sensation that strikes us as we watch many of the sequences in the film. The shots, most of them absolutely still, flow like paintings (or photographs). As the subjects are fixed within a fascinatingly rigid structure, the viewer's eye is only rarely

invited to participate in the chronotopic construction of the film. The viewer is not invited to let his mind wander from the film but is rather encouraged to a solemn contemplation that makes all promise of reaching beyond the screen unattainable. The sides of the frame seem to delineate an indelible line. In other words, what is not shown does not exist.

This aesthetic is rarely seen in contemporary works, as filmmakers often prefer a participatory set that requires the viewers to take a stand thus allowing all that is visible and imagined to run freely and to weave in their own mental universe. Yet, in the sense that this film imposes a point of view forever restricting our field of vision, the logic at work throughout *Ida* prevents any autonomous visual construction.

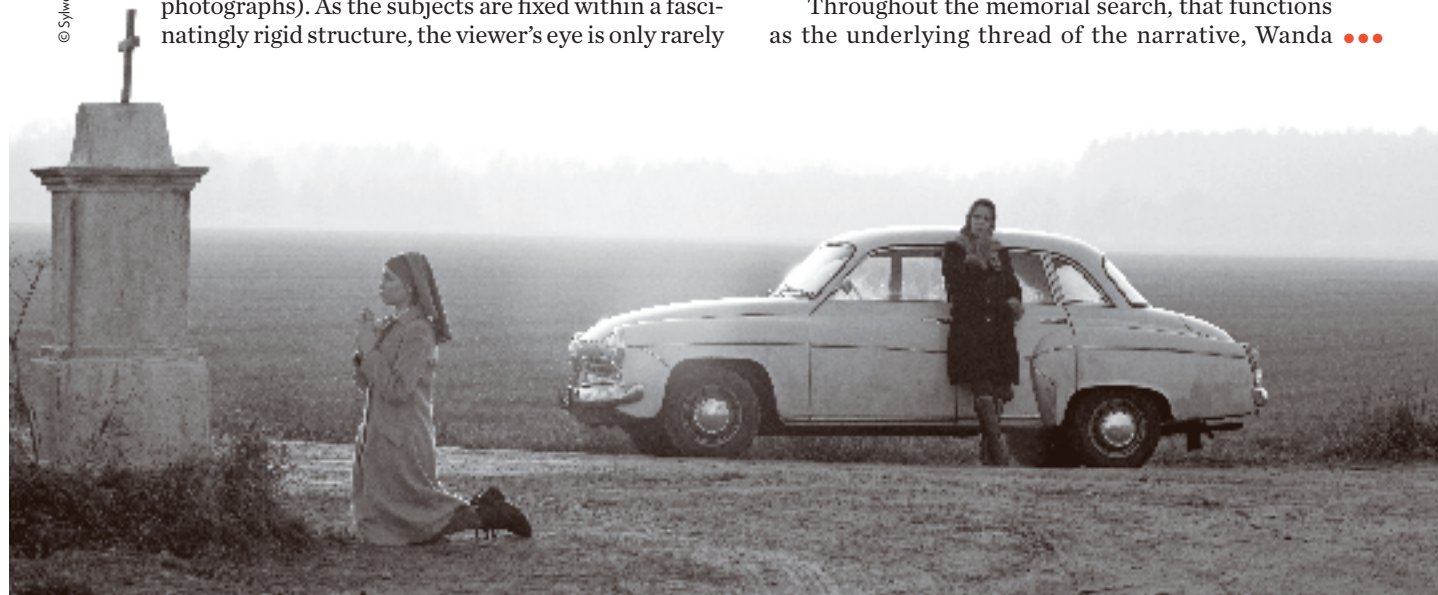
It is in the scenes that take place at the convent, that this "death of seeing" is the most striking. The faces of the nuns (and so including *Ida*'s) are perpetually held captive within the frame. And when, toward the end of the film, they lay on the ground in the position of a cross, they nearly become an element of the setting. The passivity of their bodies, artificially maintained at the extreme edges of the image, prevents from recognizing them if not as human figures, then at least as cinematographic figures. They are merely figures devoid of desire, for whom the image doesn't give the possibility of existing beyond its limits. Yet, this aesthetic does not reign unchallenged and the purpose of the film is precisely to question this on several occasions and even to deconstruct it.

Throughout the memorial search, that functions as the underlying thread of the narrative, Wanda ●●●



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- (the aunt) is the one who begins the search, trying to make the witnesses of the slaughter speak, whereas Ida remains cloistered in her silence. In this context, Ida will for the first time question her sense of desire, namely her desire to see, appearing here as the way to understand the world that surrounds us. Indeed, she could not feel this necessity within the insular and protected world of the convent, as it was always so stifling.

The girl is to a certain extent infantilized here. Incapable of influencing the events, she lets her aunt do things for her, only reserving the right to observe. Her observation becomes progressively more intense, reaching its apogee with the scene when the bodies are discovered. This sequence should be remembered. Indeed, it marks an important point in the construction of her character. During the entire film, Ida's vision is, as we have mentioned, limited; yet, all of a sudden, even though she no longer appears on screen, we can feel her presence in every other scene. Standing beside her aunt, we can't see her face, but we can visualize her expression as she looks toward the murderer, who seems to be overwhelmed by the weight of his sins.

To forgive is then the only viable solution, because everyone, as it is presented in the film, is guilty of the devastation in Poland. The film's unity can only emerge through the religious character who guarantees a sense of morality and is the only one capable of ensuring the country a future freed from the weight of guilt.

The liberation of Ida's vision transpires more obviously in the manifestation of her desire for love. In the course of the memorial search she goes on with her aunt, she meets a young saxophonist who falls in love with her. Extremely reserved, she doesn't dare look at him directly and is content at first to glance at him

through the review mirror. Though insignificant in appearance, this stolen glance marks the beginning of her emancipation. These situations increasingly are repeated until, finally, she accepts not to conceal anymore the desire she feels. Nevertheless, as her desire for love and for memorial knowledge is closely interwoven, Ida cannot complete her initiation or claim to be a woman until she has set about understanding the wounds of the past. It is only after having grasped the magnitude of this concealed violence and especially the impossibility of repairing or even of punishment – which, in the construction of the film, only allows the possibility of a spiritual interpretation – that she feels authorized to conclude her love initiation and to turn toward her future: accepting her life as a nun.

To conclude, we can say that by understanding the importance of her eyes as an instrument in the construction of her identity, Ida indeed becomes a film character. At the beginning we explained that the aesthetic of the film had something primitive about it. Yet, this primitivity fades as Ida becomes an adult. She is the one who carries the film and writes it, helping to overcome her initial rigidity. This development begins with the heroine's very first arrival in town.

Looking out of the window, she sees streets pass by and can only notice the haste that reigns there. The movement of the camera, only conditioned by the movement of the tram, happens fortuitously. Ida, suddenly confronted by her own way of seeing that seeks for the first time to grasp a reality that is beyond her, creates a cinematographic impression that seemed until this point unattainable or even unfathomable. Everything happens as if in this unexpected emergence of her eyes, cinema is born.

However, the entire idea compromises itself with a relatively gratuitous mannerism, an aesthetic (the use of black and white shots, of the 4:3 format, etc...) that expresses a nostalgia of a cinema that does not exist anymore, that draws its expression from theatre, paintings or photography and that distrusts its own specificity. The strength of cinematographic discourse is diluted within the formal artifice. The distance that the filmmaker should have interwoven nevertheless takes shape within the viewer's mind, not as an adhesion to a voluntarily referential intention, but as a rejection of a construction where its artificiality seems at times to override its truth. ■

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